

The three faces of Kew

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Abstract

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, a World Heritage Site, consists of 800 acres of landscaped gardens; two historic museum collections; the world's largest collection of living plants; a Site of Special Scientific Interest; 41 listed structures; an art collection and a library and archive. It means many different things to different people.

Over the past few years, we have carefully shaped our strategy so that we can pass different messages to different communities in a rational and consistent way through a Corporate Communications Plan. Internationally, our identity needs to redress the balance of past Imperialism. We have developed new technologies for sharing three-dimensional museum objects electronically across the world. Nationally, our emphasis is on value for money, to justify taxpayers' expenditure, and underline our excellence as one of the country's top five admission-charging visitor attractions. Our local neighbourhood strategy is even more sophisticated than our national strategy, in order to protect our income generation possibilities. Here our message is: "your goals are our goals too."

Our successes have been very hard won. Along the way we have had difficult learning experiences, and we realize that this is a journey for life - the organization will never arrive at a final destination!

Key words: Identity, message, international, national, local

The Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, a World Heritage Site, consists of 800 acres of landscaped gardens in two different locations; two historic museum collections; the world's largest collection of living plants; a Site of Special Scientific Interest; 41 listed structures; an art collection and a library and archive. It means many different things to different people. Not surprisingly, we have suffered from an internal identity crisis, so it is no wonder that we have been asking ourselves how we should present our organisation to others.

Why does it matter so much? It can be very useful to slide from one identity to another. If we are competing for funding against other scientific organisations, we might play down our museum status. If we want to be understood by the public, we are tempted to stress the visible part of our collections, and not speak so much about the work that goes on behind the scenes. However, this is a slippery path that leads to confusion both internally and externally. Ask a scientist to explain our organisation, and you will naturally get a description that focuses on using collections for both academic studies and to inform action in the field. Ask an archivist or curator, and they will describe Kew as a safe repository of precious objects with cultural, historic and scientific significance. Ask a member of the business team what Kew is about, and they will tell you we are a leading visitor attraction that needs to generate income.

Our search for an agreed identity that would serve internally to unify and motivate staff, and externally to explain a complex organisation, began many years ago with the creation of a mission statement: "To enable better management of the earth's environment by increasing knowledge and understanding of the plant and fungal kingdoms - the basis of life on earth." This phrase was much debated, and finally agreed, but is so general that we felt it did not

describe the multi-faceted nature of the organisation that is Kew.

Let me explain. 250 years ago, our gardens began as a place of curiosity and amusement for the Royal Family. In summer they would escape the heat of the city to live a simple life at Kew, building a garden full of plants from all over the world and offering pleasant surroundings for picnics and concerts. Right from the start it was a place for people to visit and enjoy. Right from the start it was a place where interesting plants could be studied. During the 19th century, the Victorians amassed interesting specimens from around the world and laid down the foundations of modern plant science by introducing a small cottage with microscopes. Today, on the site of that cottage is one of the world's leading laboratories of plant DNA studies and a powerhouse of investigation into the secret properties of plants. From here, Kew ventures into future cures for human disease based on plant ingredients, and grapples with the challenge to discover bio-fuels before the world's supply of oil runs out. Scientists move in a triangle of study between their laboratories, the living collection of plants in the gardens, and the great Herbarium where over 7 million species of plant are stored. This is an activity that Georgian or Victorian collectors would have perfectly understood, where your office or study contains a cabinet of curiosities; books and drawings; scientific instruments; and recently arrived additions. An ideal environment to ponder the wonders of the world and reach for better understanding.

Our postcode, or 'zip code', defines an area of land where there is the greatest plant biodiversity on the planet. Even the tropical rainforests do not have as great a range of plant life, living and preserved, as exists at Kew. We owe this to the early explorers and plant collectors who gathered material from throughout the world without a second thought as to ownership. This imperialist

legacy is both a magnificent asset, and a burden. Lord May, President of the Royal Society, recently expressed it this way, "Part of Kew's role is to reverse imperialism. Biodiversity action plans, conservation registers, online databases, training and education at home and in the field are the tools to do it." Far from hugging our collection to our ourselves, the whole ethos of modern Kew is to host and enable visiting scientists and students from overseas as a normal part of our practice, while disseminating our findings and access to our collections as far and as fast and as freely as possible.

In the 1960s we acquired use of a large estate outside London called Wakehurst Place. As well as being a lovely garden and well-preserved natural woodland, it is also the home of the most ambitious plant conservation project in the world - the Millennium Seed Bank. Here will be stored seeds of all of the UK's wild plant species, and 10% of the world's wild plant seeds. This is achieved through international partnerships, starting with agreements negotiated at the government level, and followed by collaborations in the field whereby overseas scientists are trained in collection techniques, and all knowledge and collections are shared. Wherever possible, we help other nations to start their own Seed Banks. With global warming and an uncertain future ahead, we may one day be glad that we have stored the mechanisms for re-introducing plant life.

Like all museums or publicly-owned collections, we exist to serve everyone. However, we can only begin to understand who 'everyone' is by segmenting our world into smaller parts. To begin with, we know that we need to work with and serve an international audience of scientific collaborators, governments, widely scattered local communities, researchers, students, and potential visitors to the gardens. At the

national level we know that we should justify our use of taxpayers' money. (We receive 60% of our funding from the Government.) The national audience is also the one that we need to persuade to visit, or to participate in educational outreach programmes, or to better understand our mission so that we can create a climate conducive to our goals. Finally, we have a local audience of neighbouring homes and businesses who take a close interest in our activities. This audience overlaps to a certain extent with our own staff, who are part of the local community, but also part of the team at Kew. So, we have identified that we have core business with three distinct groups of people, international, national and local, and that each of those three needs to be engaged and coerced by the language that we use to describe ourselves.

Working from our mission statement, which we have revised to 'Inspire and deliver plant conservation worldwide, enhancing the quality of life', we then developed a vision statement which forms a goal for all of the staff and a hope for the future: "A plant bio-diverse world. A world in which people understand and support the value of plants." This is a statement that wraps in all of our goals, including those of scientists, educators, volunteers, and the business team. Having decided our best vision for the future, we needed to describe who we are, and what we are doing to support the vision. This resulted in a description of ourselves that we are happy to use in any situation, with any of the three audiences identified: "we are the most inspiring, diverse and beautiful gardens within the world's foremost powerhouse for plant science." As a public slogan we have been using the words, "Plants, People, Possibilities" to express what we care about and the nature of our organisation. These three words stemmed from a vital project to establish the look and style of our organisation. Instead of using

logos, typefaces and formats in a haphazard way, we have a visual identity that represents the organisation's values. Staff are required to use the new brand designs and styles in all materials, from faxes and presentations to signs and leaflets. We might revise the words at some point, to make them more dynamic, but the look, style and colour palette will remain the same. Producing a single identity for the organisation, both visually and in word form, is an important foundation stone. It presents something for staff to believe in, and provides a description that we are happy to use in all circumstances. However, this is only the start.

We have developed our sense of identity internally by examining our mission. Our staff really do feel that they have a small but important part to play in saving the planet from the effects of global warming and protecting plant life on earth. Those of us who are not scientists, and work on the business side of Kew, also feel that our efforts are important in supporting the conservation work of the organisation. However, we are aware that outside the walls of Kew, not everyone understands that plant conservation is vital to the future of the planet as we know it, and if they do, they might not understand the true significance of a 'museum-style' collection of plants. How does it all fit together? Like many other museum and science organisations, we realise that we have to explain certain principles before we can give the messages about our work. We have worked to find phrases that explain the importance of a study collection. The term 'study collection' sounds dead, but we all know that it forms the basis of knowledge needed to achieve big things. Throughout our corporate identity process we have concentrated on short powerful messages that convey our work - not only in an accurate way, but with some emotion behind it, so that people can understand on both an intellectual and a human level. To take one small

example: we use the word 'powerhouse' to describe the nature of the organisation as a plant science research centre. This is not a very specific word, and an unusual one for science, but it does convey the dynamic relationship between our study collections and the ways they are used. It injects a sense of forward momentum into an area that might otherwise be seen as static and lacking in urgency.

We test people's perceptions of Kew and its work by conducting visitor research and stakeholder consultations. Our visitors and non-visitors tell us through questionnaires and focus groups what they think about our character and status. The words they use, like "beauty" and "tranquillity", are incorporated into our advertising and promotional literature, reinforcing the positive feedback we have received. Stakeholder consultations allow us to obtain more informed feedback from particular segments of the public. For example, we recently conducted a stakeholder review for an under-used gallery within the gardens. It houses a unique collection of oil paintings by a Victorian lady artist. We consulted knowledgeable people in the field of botanical art, teachers and historians, but also visitors to the gallery and those who passed by without going inside. Our findings have informed a major restoration programme that we are about to start. We were able to establish those things that are really special about the collection; the things that really please visitors; the language they use to describe the experience; and some of the reasons why many visitors do not go inside.

Using our results from staff consultations, visitor research, and stakeholders, we were able to compose a core messages document that contains very reduced phrases and sentences that synthesise our mission and our work. We have three main themes: explaining why plants are vital to the planet; describing Kew as an inspiring place; and

telling people about our work and how they can help.

We need to communicate our identity to our three different audiences, and need three different strategies for doing so. As we get deeper into each of these strategies, the messages need to go deeper into our role and purpose, and become different from one another in order to suit the specific purpose - but the core descriptions remain the same. We tested each message by imagining that we are sharing an elevator with an important member of our core audience, and that we only had a few moments to express the nature and role of our organisation. We knew that if we could engage his attention with a short message, we might get an opportunity to tell him more details, but if we failed to engage his interest to begin with we would never succeed in explaining more complex things.

When talking to potential science partners, mostly from our international audience, we decided to say:

- Kew science is authoritative, reliable and relevant.
- Join with us in partnerships to achieve change.

We try to give examples for every statement that we make, to reinforce the message and lend a compelling human element. So we say:

- 75,000 plant species are under threat.
- Only 6% of South-East Asia's rainforest remains.
- Biodiversity is in reverse correlation to a nation's GDP - i.e. poor countries have the greatest biodiversity and are least able to protect it. This is where we focus our efforts.
- Kew leads the world in training others to protect threatened plants from illegal trade. In the last 5 years we have trained 500 students, 300 UK and overseas enforcement officers, and distributed 5000 training manuals and CD-ROMS free of

charge to workers in over 160 countries.

- In the hard-pressed mining economies of Guinea Conakry and Madagascar, we are there, identifying plant habitats that must be saved.
- Kew helped to create the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation, an international agreement to save the planet's plants, adopted by more than 180 countries. We now facilitate part of that programme and contribute directly to its targets. This means we provide specimens, floras, checklists, field guides, and people. We enable partners to identify plants and assess genetic variation in threatened populations. Etc, etc.

When talking to people who can influence our funding, the most important segment of our national audience, we say:

- We are delivering terrific value for money, and helping to support government objectives.

The examples here might be:

- We manage 800 acres of land, 41 protected buildings, 650 staff, 400 volunteers, and two of the top visitor attractions in the UK - with only 60% funding from the tax payer.
- We have 1.9 million visitors a year - an important segment of the population.
- We have an active education Department. Nearly 70 schools around the country will help Kew by take part in cutting edge research. 150 teachers and 2000 students will carry out hands-on classroom work to provide information for scientists in the MSB.
- Over 100,000 children a year use Climbers and Creepers our interactive plant play zone. Etc, etc.

For our local audience, we say:

- We care about being responsible neighbours.
- We need your support to continue our important work.
- We are all working towards efficient

operation with minimal impact on the neighbourhood.

Our examples include:

- We are an open organisation, holding public open meetings and communicating frequently with our neighbours.
- We have a traffic management plan to reduce the impact of our activities on the local area.
- Our summer concerts only generated 7 complaints from 5,000 households.
Etc, etc.

By placing all our messages in the most reduced form possible, we not only make them more effective, but we ensure that all of our staff can remember them and use them. These messages are supported by a document called 'Frequently asked questions about Kew' which tries to ensure that we are all giving consistent information when we meet people from the outside world. (We recognise that any large organisation has a challenge in providing clear information about policy and practice to all of its employees.)

Some examples from the FAQ document are:

Where would the world be without Kew?

Kew is a powerhouse for plant science and plant conservation. Almost every project to protect plants and their habitats relies on the information that Kew and our partner organisations have gathered over 250 years of study.

Without Kew's knowledge and expertise, plant life - and therefore human life - would be in greater danger.

Why does it matter that we are losing plants?

We rely on plants to maintain air that we can breathe; water to drink; and the food, fuel and shelter they provide.

Does Kew have a particular viewpoint on the climate change issue?

We have a particular interest in areas of the world that climate change predictions show to be most threatened - they are the countries with the richest and often the most under-researched plant life; and they are the poorest countries, where people are particularly dependent on their plants for food, and least able to take action for conservation.

What action should be taken?

All of us, governments, companies and individuals need to cut carbon emissions in order to limit warming to a 2 degree increase or less. (Most scenarios suggest that 2 degrees warming could be coped with, but 5-6 degrees warming would be disastrous for human life and biodiversity as we know it.)

How many people benefit from Kew's commitment to education?

Hundreds of thousands every year, from children to mature people.

We are visited by 100,000 schoolchildren and students each year. Many more visit free of charge as a leisure activity with their families.

Any day of the year, there are over 100 visiting researchers using our on-site facilities, and many more online or using our publications. In addition, we provide training overseas for several hundred people each year.

What does it cost to run Kew? (Every member of staff should know these figures)

It costs over £28 million a year to run Kew. The Government meets 60% of our needs. We raise the remaining money ourselves.

What do you spend the money on?

We have over 650 staff, 800 acres of land (over 300 at Kew and 465 acres in Sussex), and multiple science programmes taking place here and in some 40 overseas

countries at any one time.

Over 3,000 sq metres of laboratories

A billion seeds banked

7.5 million preserved plant specimens

Over 30,000 different species of living plants

850,000 fungal specimens

41 Grade I and Grade II listed structures.

And there are many more examples that ensure everyone has something to say, and we all say approximately the same thing.

The mechanism for delivering our messages to an international audience is supplemented by media activity, but we could not possibly manage PR campaigns with global reach, so this is an area where we have to allow actions to speak louder than words. Our publications programme is ambitious, with a target of over 400 books, papers and articles per year. Otherwise, it is our activity in the field that speaks for us. We are active in over 100 overseas countries, and rarely on our own. We work with other organisations, but often we work with local communities - farmers, villagers, and small local authorities. It is here, on the ground, that our identity needs to be one that redresses the balance of past perceptions. 100 years ago, we were collectors, today we are disseminators, and we need our international partners to understand that difference. The flow of information and advice is now all outwards from Kew to some of the poorest countries in the world, for example: Burkina Faso, Mali, Namibia, Tanzania, Botswana, Kenya, and South Africa, to collect and secure their plant life. We have formal collection agreements, signed at the presidential level, with 17 overseas countries, the most recent of which is China, and we hope to have many more. Our aim is to build capacity, and help our partners to develop sustainable practices. Part of this commitment is the training of hundreds of individuals from all around the world; and part is the dissemination of knowledge through

online databases and through direct fieldwork. Here our message is "Work with us to achieve something important."

Online databases and placing research results online for all to share is just one component of our efforts to disseminate the riches that Kew represents. Our core material resource is the Herbarium, full of plant specimens - some of which were collected by Darwin in the early voyages of discovery. Anyone working on a habitat or plant conservation project anywhere in the world is likely to need to refer to an authoritative source in order to verify what species they are working with. There is no substitute for visual comparison specimen to specimen, so the challenge was how to place online three-dimensional objects that could be available for inspection by scientists working in remote areas. To accomplish this we have developed a technique for photographing plant specimens in such a manner that they can be closely examined electronically in microscopic detail. The resulting database, that is far from complete, but growing every day, provides a resource that can save a scientist a trip across the world to examine the collections.

One of the most effective ways for our identity to be better known and understood across the world is for scientists to speak at conferences and symposia, which they do frequently. By developing a template for presentations and a common language for describing our work, we hope that more people will appreciate the holistic nature of our apparently diverse organization.

Nationally, we are highly conscious of the fact that we are 60% supported by the British taxpayer. While the core message remains the same, the subsidiary messages must emphasize value for money. There are three strands to our identity: worthiness, excellence, and educational benefit. We present our worthiness by emphasizing that we are a prestigious scientific organization

that uses its collections and its knowledge to help save plant life on earth. Excellence is what we offer through science, but also through our World Heritage Site status as one of the country's top five admission-charging visitor attractions. Educational benefit can be demonstrated by the numbers of people to whom we have given professional training (over 1,000 in the past 5 years) while distributing training materials within 160 countries; the numbers of students who have studied and qualified at Kew (60 first degree, and about 80 PhDs each year); and the hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren who have used our education services.

National press and media outreach for our PR and advertising campaigns is more possible than global outreach, so we do expend effort and cash to create a national consciousness of what Kew is. One of the most successful ways we have found to accomplish greater awareness is by working with the BBC to make a series of programmes about the day-to-day work at Kew. This took a lot of courage to begin with. There are some very alarming examples of what can happen when a TV crew is given the freedom to film inside an organization without a strong controlling hand on what is permissible and what is not. The BBC has to protect its integrity by retaining control of programme content, so while we had an opportunity to check accuracy, we could not change what was said or shown about our organization. This was a real test of our self-confidence, and a test of whether our staff felt a sense of identity and corporate mission.

We gave the BBC team offices on site, so that they could observe the organization at close quarters. Relationships were not always easy. Sometimes they filmed things that I would have preferred not to appear on camera, but we quickly established trust. We knew that they wanted to make a good compelling series, and they appreciated the open access that we gave. They even

accompanied some of our scientists on project work in Madagascar, Ghana, China, Montserrat, St Helena, and Christmas Island.

The results were excellent. Three series of 10 to 12 episodes were filmed and screened at peak time in the UK, then in Europe, Australia and the USA. Another series will be screened in spring 2007, and there has been a separate 'spin-off' series about trees, plus books and CDs. We conducted a small piece of research to assess whether the TV programmes impacted our visitor figures, and found that the first series alone was worth £160,000 in admission income.

So, we are beginning to get a picture of a self-confident organization with an out-going personality and a big international outreach. However, at the local level the challenge is quite different. Our activities have an impact on 5000 households all around our perimeter. We need to manage our relationships with local residents very carefully indeed. We have to raise about £10million every year just to keep the organization operational. Under UK law, we need a license to carry out certain activities that bring large numbers of visitors to special events. For example, we have about 50 weddings a year in the gardens, generating important income. We also have music concerts in summertime and an ice-rink in winter. We need planning consent to erect temporary structures in the garden over 28 days duration, and a license to serve alcohol. We also need planning permission to build new buildings, whether for science or the public. This permission, and the licenses, are granted by our local government, not by the national government, which means that people who live near to the gardens have a say in whether we are allowed to operate as we wish.

I do not want to give the impression that we travel a smooth pathway. We encounter our share of difficulties. Two years ago we had some loan items in Australia impounded under a bye-law to protect cultural property.

Even though the material was returned, and some important agreements were reached for the future, such an incident is a step backwards in fulfilling the goals we have set for our organization, and reminds people of past practice that is long gone. A year ago we had an application to build a much-needed extension to our Herbarium refused by the local authority. A very small number of local residents mounted a campaign to prevent construction of the building. It was a big lesson in handling local relationships with the same or greater sophistication than our international relationships. We learned quickly and after some months of difficult work won the permission we needed. We are building now, and it will be finished in Spring 2008. We are very protective of our reputation at all levels, and every time a major article on plant conservation appears in the press, we want to see a mention of our work, and are very disappointed if we do not.

In general, we are achieving our goals. Over the past few years, we have carefully shaped our internal and external identities so that we can pass different messages to different communities in a rational and consistent way. We have redesigned our brand, and pay close attention to how it is used. We work hard with the media to create a sense of our identity in public perceptions. Our various business plans and internal documents determine the language that we

will use to talk to different people. We have a higher international and national profile than ever before through multiple television programmes and increasing press coverage at home and abroad. Among our recent fundraising successes are three individual gifts of £1 million, £2 million and £6 million, plus £10 million from the Mellon Foundation. Last year we attracted 1.9 million visitors, the highest figures for 50 years. Our successes have been very hard won, and along the way we have had difficult learning experiences. We are constantly renewing our own understanding of our organization, and re-shaping our ways of explaining to the public. Times change and new challenges arise. We know this is a journey for life - the organization will never arrive at a final destination!



KEW, Palm House in Autumn

About the author

Ms. Sue Runyard is former Head of PR and Marketing for the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Natural History Museum, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles. She has served as press officer for two cabinet ministers during a secondment to the Cabinet Office, and ran the museum's component of the European Arts Festival in 1994. She devised and for nine years administered the Museums & Galleries Commission's Marketing Grants Scheme, working with over 200 museums on their marketing and PR plans. In 1995 she inaugurated UK National Museums Week. Until recently, she was Director of Museums Without Walls, an international consultancy working museums and arts organizations in the USA, Russia and Europe. In addition to her position at Kew, she is currently Associate Trustee at the Museum of Science & Industry at Manchester, Committee member for the Heritage Lottery Fund South-East, and President of the BTG Educational Foundation based in Los Angeles. Her publications on museum management are held throughout the English- and Russian-speaking world. She has contributed to many overseas projects for UNESCO and the Prince of Wales Business Leaders' Forum.